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The New
Holy Week
Order

JOHN LaFARGE



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THOMAS E. HENNEBERRY, S.J.
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JOHN A. GOODWINE, J.C.D.
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✦ FRANCIS CARDINAL SPELLMAN
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WHEN THE TV PRODUCER asked his little five-year-old daughter to say grace for the company at dinner, she prayed: "This food is brought to us through the courtesy of Almighty God." We may say that the new order for Holy Week is also brought to us through the courtesy of Almighty God, for His finger may be seen therein. Beginning with 1956—March 25 to April 1—the Catholic faithful all over the world, except in the Oriental rites, will observe a new Holy Week ritual, according to the decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued November 16, 1955.

Many people, especially those who make a point of attending Holy Week services, will naturally inquire as to what the changes may mean. However, they are not altogether sudden changes. Some have long been expected by liturgical scholars. Furthermore, when in 1951 our Holy Father Pope Pius XII prescribed experimentally a new order for the celebration of the Holy Saturday services in the form of the Easter Vigil, it was the first step toward the new order of Holy Week. In quite a number of dioceses in this country the Easter Vigil has already been observed over these four years and a fairly large number of people have become familiar with it. Some, however, who have always felt a deep attachment and devotion for Holy Week's venerable ceremonies are troubled by alterations

in what they had been accustomed to regard as unalterable. Some of the widespread and popular Holy Week devotions will be to some extent affected by the new arrangements.

Nevertheless, the Church is very much in earnest about this change. We cannot in justice merely shrug our shoulders or complain and growl because of minor inconveniences. The Sacred Congregation is at great pains to explain that the Church's purpose in the new order is *pastoral*, precisely to help us better to know and practise our faith.

I will naturally ask myself, what does this mean to me? What is my attitude toward this new development? Let us answer these questions with a bit of history.

Much the same situation prevailed fifty years ago when Pope Saint Pius X issued his decrees permitting and urging the practice of frequent and daily Communion, as well as the early Communion of little children. In point of fact, this practice was no novelty; it was merely restoring the observance of the early Church, which had lapsed through the centuries. Yet people then were much alarmed and perplexed at what seemed to them a rash and, as it were, unheard-of action. Now after half a century we have become completely accustomed to the idea of frequent and early Communion. We see the vast fruits that have come from frequent reception of our

Saviour's Body and Blood. Today few Catholics would wish to return to the old days when it was considered proper to receive Communion only four times a year, and a



mark of special devotion to receive as frequently as once a month.

The mention of the name of Saint Pius X reminds us that this present liturgical reform, the most far-reaching one of our times, is simply one further step in the changes which he set on foot during his pontificate: a restoration which, unfortunately, was retarded by the events and consequences of two world wars.

THE CHURCH'S INVITATION

To clear our own minds, therefore, let us remember a very simple fact. The Church invites you to take part in these observances but does not compel you. There is no obligation. The last three days

of Holy Week, which were once holy days of obligation, are now no longer such, being long ago freed from that status by Pope Urban VIII. Nevertheless, the invitation is pressing and the rewards are great. The Church urges you to take part in wonderful exercises which commemorate the great action of Christ for our redemption.

At Christmas we join in a beautiful commemoration of the first part of that great action, its humble but sublime beginning in the darkness, cold and poverty of Bethlehem. Here in Holy Week we commemorate its climax. The act occurred in history almost 2,000 years ago in a specific spot which was the Holy Land, the City of Jerusalem, on a specific date and at a specific time. The Last Supper took place in the late evening of Thursday; the death of Christ took place on Calvary at three on Friday afternoon, followed by his burial; and the Saturday night watch preceding the Resurrection, just before dawn.

We, as it were, annually re-enact these ceremonies. Only we do not attempt an exact representation, as in the Passion Play, which strives to reproduce the costumes, the figures, the sights and sounds of the Sacred Passion. The Church presents them through symbols which have a profound effect on the human heart and, in the words of St. Paul, show forth the Lord's death. These symbols are simple: objects and actions, such as darkness and light, the

crucifix, the symbolism of baptism, processions, candles, solemn prayers, pauses of deep silence, genuflection, veiling and unveiling. Such symbols are readily understood from time immemorial by vast numbers of the human race. They are not so specific as pictorial representation, but they touch much deeper human chords.

The act of worship *itself is a renewal*. There is a sacramental center to these observances, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the great act of Christ is made present to us because His own person, body and blood, soul and divinity, is reproduced. We are not merely present at this act which is performed in time and eternity and brought to us upon our altars, but we actually *enter into it* in a mysterious way. We enter into it spiritually during the Holy Mass and mystically and physically in Holy Communion.

We are therefore expected to do our part in outward as well as inward worship. The main element in our worship, as Pope Pius XII reminds us (*Mediator Dei*, n. 23), is interior, but, he also tells us, outward worship has its function. We are not to be mere spectators looking on at a sacred performance. The Holy Father quotes Cardinal Bona:

Although the ceremonies themselves can claim no perfection of sanctity in their own right, they are, nevertheless,

the outward acts of religion, designed to rouse the heart, like signals of a sort, to veneration of the sacred realities, and to raise the mind to meditation on the supernatural.

One way the congregation can show this outward worship is by responding or answering. Repeatedly in this new liturgy the directions call for the response of "all the people." Certainly there is no doubt that any congregation, at least with a little practice, can learn to recite or sing the Amen or the answers to the litanies.

In the service of the Easter Vigil the baptismal promises are recited in English so that we can make our responses to these sacred formulas in that same language.

CALL FOR COOPERATION

The Church asks, therefore, for our cooperation. This



means a certain effort on our part, something over and above mere attention to the services. So many of our popular devotions dispense us from that initial effort, as it were, by making a vivid appeal to our

emotions and senses, or imparting great religious truths through eloquent preaching. The Church's official, liturgical Holy Week observances demand a good quota of cooperation. This calls for a certain live interest, which in turn should be based on knowledge. Hence the advantage of study. If we wish really to respond to the Church's invitation we should study this new order, these ceremonies. We should read them over carefully before attending them and, if possible, read some interpretation of the same. This should not be difficult, since our diocesan press will often have such explanations, and in many cases they will be provided by pamphlets obtainable at the church door.

A very practical plan would seem to be for small groups to unite for this purpose, or to do it in one's own family. Neighbors might assemble a week or two before Palm Sunday or at some opportune time in Lent to read over, line by line, the beautiful words of the Holy Week ceremonies, to comment thereon and study an authentic interpretation, just as at other times of the year neighbors assemble to recite the rosary.

We shall find this effort infinitely rewarding—not merely because we thus learn many beautiful and wonderful truths, but above all because this sacred week "shows forth" what we might call the heart mystery of our faith, that which St. Paul refers to repeatedly as the Mystery of God, the

central mystery of our whole Christian and Catholic belief. It is sometimes hard for Catholics today to sum up their faith in a few words, yet we often need to put our fingers, as it were, on the very essence of what it means. Here, therefore, is an opportunity to obtain just that central grasp of the faith that you need for the world around you.

Obviously participation in this Holy Week order means some adjustment of our lives. Sometimes it is not easy for working or for business people. Modifications the Church has recently decreed with regard to the Eucharistic fast now make it easier to attend the evening Mass and receive Holy Communion. Regulations on practical points will be obtainable from your pastor and will be proclaimed by the archbishop or bishop of the diocese according to the needs of each particular locality.

The same principle of readjustment will apply to the various popular devotions. Roman authorities on the liturgical program are careful to explain that readjustment of the Holy Week ceremonies does not by any means require the abolition of popular devotions such as the Three Hours devotion, the Way of the Cross, devotions to our Sorrowful Mother, and so on. They are extremely careful, however, to insist that in every case the sacred liturgy comes first and must be given the first place in our observance.

LATE HOLY THURSDAY afternoon the Church commemorates in a very special sense the Supper our Saviour took with His disciples the evening before He died. The paschal supper of the Jews itself commemorated the greatest event in all Israel's past history: the deliverance of Israel's people under Moses from the Egyptians and their dry-shod crossing of the Red Sea. On the night that Jesus celebrated the Jewish paschal supper with His disciples, the Old Testament and the New Testament were united. Our own beautiful liturgical celebration reminds us, in turn, that the New Testament in this life is united with the glorious eternal Supper which Jesus promised we shall some day celebrate with Him in the Kingdom of His Father.

The Church invites us to join with her in this commemoration, just as Jesus invited the disciples to join with Him in blessing and eating the paschal supper in the upper room. Though somewhat perplexed, they accepted the invitation with reverence and wonder. On our part, we come to these ceremonies with a like spirit of reverence and wonder, for they commemorate in a very special manner the great mystery of our redemption. That mystery is central to our faith and central to the history of the world.

At the time, the disciples were not wholly grateful. They grumbled; they complained and even quarreled with one another. After

all, the Holy Spirit had not yet come to them. It was only at a later time, at Pentecost, that the Spirit did descend upon them and enlighten them. Then it was that they understood and knew that the spectacle they had witnessed on that chilly March night was a revelation of God's love, a revelation of God, as the Evangelist Saint John says, who loved them "unto the end." Since the Holy Spirit *has* taught us, it is not so difficult for us to be grateful.

THE NEW COMMANDMENT

The Mass of Holy Thursday is built around the theme of Christ's New Commandment of love (Latin *mandatum*) expressed symbolically in the washing of the feet. The Gospel sung during the Mass tells of that wonderful event when the Saviour girded a towel around Him and washed the disciples' weary and dust-stained feet, according to the hospitable custom of the ancients when they wanted to honor their guests. This ceremony is called the *mandatum*, from which the old English name for Holy Thursday is derived: Maundy Thursday.

The new ritual order makes special provision so that this foot-washing may be performed during the Mass itself. In some places it is actually carried out, and bishops and priests wash the feet of aged charity patients in imitation of Our Lord's action. If a literal foot-washing is not feasible,

at least it can be done figuratively, through other acts of charity.

The old Fathers of the Church pointed out that we fulfil the Lord's commandment by charity to the poor, who are the feet of the Lord. "Perhaps the feet of the Lord are in need," they said. Hence the old custom of distributing alms on Maundy Thursday. Today let us renew in our hearts the spirit of giving. Let us recall to our minds this new commandment. "Perhaps" someone we know *is* in need. There may be need of material alms, support, visits, and so on. Some may need spiritual alms of prayer, counsel, good books and example. Or they may need what in certain cases is the very special spiritual gift of being recognized by others as a fellow human being.

This is our personal response to Holy Thursday's great gift to us, a new gift, the Bread of Life. For Jesus had long ago already told His disciples that He Himself was the Bread of Life, and that this Bread—His own sacred Body—was given for the life of the world. And on this great occasion, "Breaking, He gave to His disciples, saying take ye and eat . . ." To give yourself, or of yourself, means some "breaking" on your own part, too.

So to emphasize this point, to impress it deeply in our hearts, we follow the sacred Gifts (which is the name in the Oriental Church for the Blessed Sacrament) into retirement and kneel in humble adoration at

the Repository, either in the church where we attended the services or by visiting other churches in the neighborhood. Until Good Friday afternoon the faithful adore the Sacrament in retirement, as it were, until It is brought back to the altar at the close of the Good Friday services. They pray for their needs, the needs of the Church and the needs of all God's children around the globe.

Let us note parenthetically that the Tenebrae service which we have been accustomed to celebrate in the evening is now celebrated in the mornings of Thursday, Friday and Saturday, with choral recitation of the Psalms, and chanting of the Lessons taken from the Prophet Jeremias.



GOOD FRIDAY

This leads us up to the services on Good Friday afternoon. The mood of Good Friday is no longer the mood of the Supper Room, one of intimate wondering. It is rather the mood of Mary, the Mother of

Jesus, the Mother of Sorrows, as she journeys out to Calvary and takes her stand at the foot of the Cross. It is in the mood of the few faithful, frightened disciples, a mood of agony and terror mixed with love. What takes place now is unique in all the year's services. It is a sequel to the scene of the night previous. The Church rouses us to a sense that now this is the great turning point of history, the event foreseen by the prophets for centuries, the fulfilment of ancient prophecies, the culmination of the history of Israel.

Details of the Sacred Passion are solemnly chanted in the version of the Evangelist Saint John. What is our reaction to the recitation of this drama? We fall on our knees and pray for all the world, we pass the world and its problems in view before our minds in these solemn petitions, all of which lead up to the supreme drama of the Cross. We pray for the different departments of the Church: the Holy Father, the bishops, priests, the faithful, the religious. We pray for all those who in suffering are wandering over the face of the earth; we pray for the pilgrims, for the sick. We pray for the sinners. We pray for those unhappy souls who are in the darkness of paganism or are in the error of heresy and Judaism.

We pray collectively, kneeling for a moment of private prayer at the deacon's command. *Flectamus genua!* Then we join with the celebrant as he offers up the collective

prayer of the congregation. This leads up to the adoration of the Cross, carried in procession into the sanctuary and solemnly unveiled, with the triple singing of the words: "Behold the Wood of the Cross." The Cross reveals to us the Body of Christ, the Bread of Life, broken for us all, broken through physical suffering, and by the breaking of His Heart through sorrow. While the congregation approaches, one at a time, to venerate the Cross held at the altar-rail, the choir sings the *Improperia* or Reproaches, in which we express our wonder that after all God did for His own people, they should treat Him thus cruelly. These are followed by the superb hymn, *Crux fidelis*, "O Faithful Cross."

GOOD FRIDAY COMMUNION

But the Church will not allow this sorrow to be sterile. The Good Friday offering is also a Good Friday banquet. With the singing of the hymn *Vexilla Regis*, "The Standard of the King," the Blessed Sacrament, consecrated on Holy Thursday, is brought to the altar from its hiding, and we partake once more in Holy Communion of the fruit of the Last Supper.

This we do at the final ceremony in the Holy Week services, the so-called Mass of the Presanctified, which, however, is not really a Mass but rather a solemn Communion service. The ceremonies begin with the chanting of the *Pater Noster*, the Our

Father. If we pray the Our Father privately to ourselves at that time, or speak the Latin answer to the priest's prayer, we can make this recitation of the Our Father the culmination, as it were, of our Good Friday celebration. In the Lord's Prayer our Saviour bids us ask the Father for our daily bread, but that can be also taken in the sense of the "super-substantial bread," the Holy Sacrament itself. In this same Lord's Prayer we ask for the forgiveness of our own sins; then we carry out the Saviour's solemn admonition that we forgive our brother from our heart, something we must do if our sacrifice is to be valid. So we ask that our own sins be forgiven as we forgive those who trespass against us. Let us, then, make our Good Friday Communion a general absolution in our hearts for all those people, young or old, who have wronged us or against whom we are inclined to bear ill will.

The service ends in silence with the stripping of the altars. Our final mood is one of mourning, the spirit of the disciples when the Body of Jesus was laid away in the tomb and



the holy women returned in silence and sorrow for that night of grief and that morning of quiet sadness. From now on to the beginning of the services late Saturday evening there is quiet and expectation, broken only by the solemn service of the *Tenebrae* on Saturday morning.

THE EASTER VIGIL CEREMONIES are so impressive and picturesque that they move deeply even those who merely witness them. However, the Church invites us not only to witness but actually to take part in the Holy Week ceremonies. She also expects us, as was said previously, to make a certain amount of effort and grasp at least a few points in order to learn something of the wealth of ideas contained in these acts and the words that accompany them.

We will understand them more easily if we recall that the Easter Vigil service has three main parts: the ceremonies of the *Lumen Christi*, the baptismal ceremonies, and the first Mass of the Resurrection of Our Saviour.

LUMEN CHRISTI

The first part is a great symbolic ceremony of light and darkness in preparation for the glory of Easter. It is a shortened form of the all-night, candle- or lamp-lighted vigil which the early Christians observed before greeting the risen Saviour at dawn. They passed the time with chants and

Scripture readings, private prayers and collective prayers led by the priest.

The first action of the Vigil is the striking of the new fire. This reminds the congregation, who are assembled at or near the door of the church, of the darkness in which Christ's sacred Body has been lying in the tomb ever since it was removed from the Cross on Good Friday afternoon.

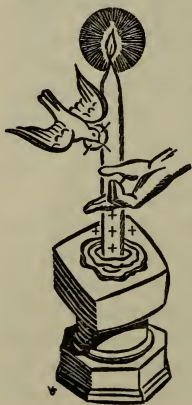
After the lighting of the new fire and the blessing of the paschal candle, in which bits of incense are inserted, the *Lumen Christi* procession begins: thurifer, subdeacon with the cross, deacon with the paschal candle, celebrant, acolytes, servers and clergy, and finally the people. The procession halts three times: just inside the church, in the middle of the church and before the high altar. At each stop the deacon chants *Lumen Christi*, "The Light of Christ," at which all the others genuflect toward the candle and reply *Deo gratias*, "Thanks be to God." Candles are lighted successively at the different stops. The large candle is placed on a stand in the middle of the sanctuary. This is followed by the singing of the *Exsultet* by the deacon.

The ceremony pays special honor to the light that Jesus brought into the world by His coming, and to Himself as Light of the World. We glory in the light of the truth which He revealed from the Father and which the Holy Spirit transmits to us through His enlightening operation in all

ages and places. We honor the light shed upon our dark world by His holy and spotless life during His years on earth. We honor the light of His grace poured into our souls at baptism and preparing us to share in the supreme light, the light of His glory, the triumph of His Resurrection.

In her Vigil ceremonies the Church develops this light-theme with a wealth of poetic imagination. We exalt this light in the blessing of the Easter Candle and in the solemn chant that follows it.

The wonder of this light is heightened by its being revealed in the darkness of night. So the Church reminds us that this is a special night, the night of the new Pasch. In the old Jewish ceremony for the observance of the Passover the child asks his father to explain the meaning of this night. The father replies by telling the children that this is the night in which the people of Israel fled from the Egyptians. In the New Testament, if the child asks his parents the meaning of this night, they tell him this is the night of the new Passover in which God freed all mankind from the twofold bondage of sin and death. It is the night of liberation: man is liberated



through Christ's Resurrection, which has occurred already in time and eternity and whose effects are ever with us. Through the new heavenly life of grace, which we receive in baptism, we share in the fruit of that Resurrection.

Hence, at the outset of the Vigil the deacon sings the solemn *praeconium* or heralding, which begins with the word *Exsultet* and is often so called. The melodic phrases of this great hymn linger in the mind long after it has been chanted. It sums up in magnificent language the various senses in which we speak of this as the "great night":

This is the paschal feast wherein is slain the true Lamb whose blood hallowes the door-posts of the faithful.

This is the night on which Thou didst first cause our forefathers, the sons of Israel, in their passage out of Egypt, to pass dry-shod over the Red Sea.

This is the night which purged away the blackness of sin by the light of the fiery pillar.

This is the night which at this hour throughout the world restores grace and yokes to holiness those who believe in Christ, detaching them from worldly vice and all the murk of sin.

On this night Christ burst the bonds of death and rose victorious from the grave . . .

By this night's holiness crime is banished and sin washed away; innocence is restored to the fallen and gladness to the sorrowful. It drives forth hate, brings peace and humbles tyranny.

In thanksgiving for this night, then, Holy Father, receive the evening sacrifice of this fire.

THE BAPTISMAL FONT

The second part of the Easter Vigil ceremony is devoted to baptism. We renew, as it were, our own baptism. We gain a new concept of its wonderful significance. Our will is strengthened to lead the life required by the promises our sponsors made for us if we were baptized as infants. It begins with the chanting of four Scripture lessons taken from the Old Testament. These recall the background in God's providence of those events in Israel's history which foretold and prepared for the work of the redemption.

Then two chanters intone the first part of the litanies, which are now no longer duplicated as they used to be. The congregation is invited to join in the answers, and certainly the very few simple Latin words should cause no difficulty.

The baptismal water is then blessed, with poetic allusions to the many mysteries of the sacrament. Says the Church:

Be this the font of life, a water of new birth, a purifying stream, so that

all who are to be washed in this bath of salvation may, by the working of the Holy Spirit within them, obtain the grace of perfect cleansing.

The Holy Spirit is invoked by word and by the symbol of breathing on the water. The accompanying prayer asks that His regenerative power may cleanse us from all ancestral defilement, "so that every man who enters into this sacrament of regeneration may be born again into a new childhood of true innocence."

The blessing of the baptismal water is followed by the renewal of the baptismal promises by the congregation, who hold their candles, still lighted, as they offer the responses. The celebrant reads a short instruction, and then the people answer in the same words as the sponsors at an ordinary baptism, except that they are in the plural: "We do renounce him [the evil spirit]; We do renounce them [his pomps and works]." At this moment we declare once and forever our choice of Jesus Christ as opposed to Satan and all that he does and stands for. This ceremony is followed finally by the conclusion of the litany, the Kyrie and the Solemn Vigil Mass.



THE VIGIL MASS

How deep with meaning and hope is now the Collect of the Mass, sung as it is shortly before or after the midnight hour:

O God, who dost irradiate this sacred night with the glory of our Lord's Resurrection, preserve in the new children of this family the spirit of sonship Thou hast given them, so that they may be renewed in body and soul and may render Thee pure service . . .

Saint Paul, in the Epistle, bids us to be heavenly-minded, not earthly-minded, now that we are dead to our own sinful lives and "hidden away" with the risen Christ. The Gospel tells how the Holy Women visited the empty sepulcher, and went out to tell the world the glad tidings.

Our Easter Communion brings the Body and Blood of the risen Saviour to "cleave to every fibre of my being."

The Mass concludes with a notable change from the former order. We shall miss the Magnificat at the end of the Holy Saturday Mass. Our Lady's canticle of gratitude and triumph is always sung or recited just before the end of the Church's Vesper service. It is preceded and followed by an antiphon. In the former Holy Saturday order the Mass—celebrated in the morning—concluded with a very short Vesper service, anticipating the evening hour.

In the new order, the Easter Vigil Mass

concludes, not with Vespers, but with the Church's "dawn" service of Lauds: again in the same greatly abbreviated form. The one short psalm is now Psalm 150 (last in the Book of Psalms), instead of Psalm 116. The Canticle of Zachary (the Benedictus, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel," Luke 1: 68-79) is sung instead of the Magnificat.

The Vigil Mass therefore anticipates the Church's dawn service, instead of anticipating the evening service as before. It takes us, in order of time, right up to the Day of Resurrection, Easter Sunday, again with a hymn of praise. We make a final plea that the spirit of love pour into us and make us all one in heart, through Him who reigns in the glory which He has prepared for all who have believed in and borne the cross in this world.



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PRINCIPAL CHANGES IN THE NEW HOLY WEEK ORDER

1. The hours for services will be as follows:
 - On Holy Thursday between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m.
 - On Good Friday about 3 p.m.; for good reasons later, up to 6 p.m.
 - On Holy Saturday after twilight, preferably later, so that Mass may begin about midnight heralding Easter.
2. All the Faithful may now receive Holy Communion on Good Friday.
3. The Lenten fast and abstinence now continue all day on Holy Saturday (i.e., not only till noon).

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